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OFFICE AFFAIRS
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SPYING ON THE CIA

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by DALE KASLER

The office is behind an unmarked, locked door on the 13th floor of the Federal Building in Syracuse.

If you knock, you may be startled, unless you're in the habit of staring at ceilings: a secretary's voice comes out of an overhead intercom, asking you what you want. You press your eye to the door's peephole, but of course you can't see inside.

The people inside are a bit secretive, according to some who have offices on the same floor.

"There's not an awful lot of inter-office relationship," says a man who works down the hall. "They're not in the kind of business where people can go in to make a complaint," he adds, explaining the unmarked door.

Actually, they're in the business of gathering intelligence. They're in the CIA. It's probably the least known public or private office in Syracuse, and people in the Central Intelligence Agency occupy it. But trying to find out what the CIA does here can be a reporter's nightmare, regardless of one's interest in the cloak-and-dagger games.

To begin with, the secretary who answers the phone — they're in the white pages under the U.S. government listings, but no address is given — doesn't say, "Hello, CIA." Instead, she reads the office phone number back to you, apparently trying to preserve some secrecy. Speaking on the phone to the man in charge doesn't reveal much information, either.

"Our relations with the media are handled out of Washington, D.C.," Cowles Tolman, head of the CIA in Syracuse, said some time back in denying an Empire Magazine reporter's request for an interview. No, he would not allow the reporter to see the CIA's office.

Recently, the reporter tried again to obtain an interview. He called again, and was told Tolman was on assignment in another city, and a Mr. Snyder was temporarily in charge. Snyder (he wouldn't give his first name) repeated the CIA's policy on interviews.

But the reporter persists when the average person gives up — knocked on the CIA door one afternoon. After some hesitation Snyder came out of the office (making sure the reporter couldn't see inside) and explained the agency policy.

"There are a lot of deranged people out there," the 30ish-looking, affable Snyder says, explaining the tight security. Dressed like your average businessman in a brown corduroy three-piece suit, Snyder adds, "We've been getting some crank calls lately."

In Langley, Va., the agency's headquarters, CIA public affairs officer Dale Peterson sums it up: "We're trying to maintain as low a profile as possible."

Kathy Pherson, another public affairs officer, adds, "We try to discourage people (reporters) from doing stories on them, because it defeats what they're trying to do."

What they're trying to do at the CIA in Syracuse, they say, is find out information about what's going on abroad — especially in communist countries — by interviewing Central New York residents who recently have traveled overseas.

"It could be businessmen, it could be academicians," Peterson says. Confidentiality is guaranteed for anyone who passes information on to the CIA, and "the more they see these stories in the press, the less willing people are going to be to volunteer information."

In instances where stories have been written about CIA domestic field offices — there are dozens of them around the United States, Peterson says — "we wind up being confronted with kooks knocking on our door."

Peterson won't say how many interviews CIA agents conduct with persons who have just traveled overseas, but he adds, "There's enough business" to justify keeping an office.

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